Mythologies of the Ancient World

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Myths of Ancient China

BY DERK BODDE

I. INTRODUCTION

The student of Chinese religion quickly learns that there is a world of difference between the gods of classical China (ending with the fall of the Han dynasty in A.D. 220) and those of post-classical times. The latter are large in number, diverse in origin (Buddhist, Taoist, or numerous local cults), have clearly defined anthropomorphic traits, and belong to a spiritual hierarchy which, in its gradations, closely parallels the terrestrial hierarchy of bureaucratic imperial China. These gods are portrayed for us in art, described in religious literature, and even satirized in works of fiction such as the great sixteenth-century novel *Hsi yu chi* (translated by Arthur Waley as *Monkey*). It is notable that relatively few of them are known as early as the classical period. This means that though several compendia have been published under such generalized titles as "Chinese mythology," they are of little relevance for the study of *ancient* Chinese myth since, despite their titles, they limit themselves very largely to these later gods.*

The gods of ancient China, by comparison, are fewer in

* For these compendia, see the Selected Bibliography under Ferguson, Maspero, and Werner. In this bibliography will be found all modern studies mentioned in this essay, as well as others not mentioned. Primary Chinese sources, however, are not listed, since for the specialist this is unnecessary, whereas for the general reader it has little purpose.

number, appear very rarely or not at all in art, and are commonly described so vaguely or briefly in the texts that their personality, and sometimes even their sex, remains uncertain. Side by side with them, on the other hand, appear a good many figures who, at first sight, seem to be human beings, yet on closer examination are found to display more than ordinary human qualities. They are gods or demigods who, through a process to be discussed presently, have been largely stripped of their divine attributes and transformed into men.

It would be tempting but erroneous to conclude from this that there are no myths in ancient China. More accurate would be the statement that individual *myths* certainly do occur, but not a systematic *mythology*, meaning by this an integrated body of mythological materials. On the contrary, these materials are usually so fragmentary and episodic that even the reconstruction from them of individual myths—let alone an integrated *system* of myths—is exceedingly difficult. Before discussing the myths themselves, we shall in the following section elaborate on some of the factors which may throw light on this peculiar situation. First of all, however, some definitions and explanations are in order.

In this essay we shall confine our attention to the field covered by what Stith Thompson calls a "minimum definition" of myth. "Myth," he has written (in an article appearing in *Myth: A Symposium*, 1955), "has to do with the gods and their actions, with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and of the earth. This is a minimum definition." Even within this minimum definition, moreover, reasons of space will compel us to limit ourselves still further to myths of a cosmogonic nature. This means that, aside from their mention in connection with cosmogonic phenomena, we shall be obliged to disregard the much larger category of ancient Chinese *hero* myths: those of the culture hero who enjoys supernatural birth, is sometimes aided by protective animals, becomes a sage ruler or otherwise performs great deeds for mankind, and so on.

Chronologically, our attention will be focused for the most

part on myths believed to have existed during the pre-imperial epoch of Chinese "feudalism," in other words, during the Chou dynasty (ca. 1027–221 B.C.). (For the preceding Shang dynasty, trad. 1766–ca. 1027, the extant inscriptional material is unfortunately too limited to be serviceable for our subject.) This means that whenever possible we shall base ourselves on texts belonging to the Chou dynasty itself. Because, however, these are often inadequate, we shall in case after case supplement them with the more abundant sources dating from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220)—an age of empire which, though still forming a part of China's "classical" period, differs in many respects from the pre-imperial Chou dynasty. The question of textual chronology is an exceedingly complicated one, on which we shall have more to say in a later section (II, 3).

Finally, a word about the seemingly precise dates given for many of the personages to appear in these pages. These dates, when marked as "trad." (traditional), should not, of course, be accepted literally, nor even as necessarily signifying that the personages in question ever historically existed. They derive from the traditional chronology formulated by Chinese historians of a later time, and as such are indicative of that same euhemerization about which we shall speak in a moment. We give them here, therefore, simply to show how the Chinese historians have tried to fit their ancient traditions into a chronological framework.

II. THE PROBLEMS

Though ancient Chinese myths have been studied by some of the best known scholars of East and West alike, the nature of the available data has prevented anything like a generally accepted consensus from emerging. What we have, instead, are diverse theories which, though often ingenious, are rarely

conclusive and sometimes exceedingly fanciful. In writing a brief essay such as this, therefore, we are at once confronted by an almost impossible task: that of synthesizing and simplifying where no really reliable basis exists for so doing; of compressing into a few pages what would ideally require a good-sized volume of analysis and exposition. The manifold factors responsible for this situation can perhaps be summarized under three main headings: those of euhemerization, of fragmentation and language, and of chronology.

1. The Problem of Euhemerization

The theory to which Euhemerus has given his name maintains that the origin of myth is to be found in actual history, and that the gods and demigods of mythology were, to start with, actual human beings. As commonly used by writers on Chinese mythology, however, "euhemerization" denotes precisely the opposite process: the transformation of what were once myths and gods into seemingly authentic history and human beings. Unquestionably, a fair amount of what purports to be early Chinese history has been subjected to this kind of euhemerization, the literal acceptance of which by most people until recent years has led to gross misunderstandings concerning the beginnings of Chinese civilization. Not infrequently, to be sure, the literalists might encounter certain mythological elements not wholly concealed beneath their euhemerist dress, but when this happened, these could always be explained as mere later accretions to what in essence was genuine history. Henri Maspero, in the opening paragraph of his notable study, "Légendes mythologiques dans le *Chou king*" (1924), has vividly described the situation as follows:

> Chinese scholars have never known more than one way of interpreting legendary accounts, that of euhemerization. Under the plea of recovering from such accounts their historical kernel, they eliminate those elements of the marvellous which seem to them improbable, and preserve only a colorless residue, in

> which gods and heroes are transformed into sage emperors and sage ministers, and monsters into rebellious princes or evil ministers. Such are the lucubrations which, placed end to end according to a sequence imposed upon chronology by various metaphysical theories, especially that of the five elements, constitute what is called the history of Chinese origins. In this there is nothing but the name of history; actually there are only legends, sometimes mythological in origin, sometimes coming from the ancestral temples of the great families, sometimes emanating from local religious centers, sometimes the accounts—more or less learned—which have been elaborated to explain a rite, sometimes simple stories borrowed from folklore, etc. All these phantoms ought to disappear from the history of China, whose origins they encumber; rather than persist in the search for a non-existent historical basis beneath the legendary form, we should seek to recover the mythological basis or the popular story beneath the pseudo-historical account.

It should be added that since 1924, when this was written, the Chinese scholars themselves have done wonders along these lines. In many cases, indeed, they have been more iconoclastic toward their own early history than have the Western scholars—sometimes, one might add, overly iconoclastic.

That euhemerization was already a recognized process in Chou dynasty China, and that it was then viewed with skepticism by some, is clearly indicated by several amusing anecdotes preserved in literature ranging from the fourth to around the first century B.C. In all of them, significantly, Confucius (551–479 B.C.) is made the exponent of euhemerism. The first story (contained in *Ta Tai li-chi*, ch. 62; compiled i cent. B.C. from earlier materials) concerns the legendary sage ruler Huang Ti, the "Yellow Lord" or "Yellow Emperor" (trad. xxvi cent. B.C.). "Was the Yellow Lord a man or was he not a man?" asks a disciple of Confucius.

"How is it that he reached (an age of) three hundred years?" To which Confucius is made to reply that this is a misunderstanding: what is actually meant is that during the Yellow Lord's own life of one hundred years, the people enjoyed his benefits; during the first hundred years after his death, they revered his spirit; and during the next hundred years after that, they continued to follow his teachings. "And this is why there is mention of three hundred years."

The next anecdote, also about the Yellow Lord, is based on a double meaning of the word *mien*, primarily signifying "face," but also meaning a "side, direction, quarter." In a passage from the fourth century B.C. *Shih-tzu* (now missing from the text, but quoted in a later encyclopedia), another disciple asks Confucius: "Is it true that the ancient Yellow Lord had four faces [*ssu mien*]?" To which Confucius replies that this is not at all true. What is meant is that the Yellow Lord used four officials to govern the four quarters (*ssu mien*) of his empire, so that he was "four faced" in the sense that the four "faces" or "sides" of his empire were controlled by these officials on his behalf.

The third anecdote again rests on a double meaning, this time of the word *tsu*, ordinarily meaning "foot" but in some contexts meaning "enough." This anecdote (recorded in *Han Fei-tzu*, ch. 33, and *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu*, XXII, 6; both iii cent. B.C.) has to do with a curious being called K'uei. In the euhemerized histories he is the human Music Master of the sage ruler Shun (trad. xxiii cent. B.C.), but from other scattered references we can see that he was actually a mythological creature having only one foot. In the story, the ruler of Confucius' native state of Lu is made to ask Confucius: "I have heard that K'uei was one-footed [*yi tsu*]. Is this really so?" To which Confucius replies: "K'uei was a man, so why should he have one foot?" Then he goes on to explain that because K'uei's royal master Shun was greatly pleased with K'uei's musical ability, he once exclaimed of him: "As to K'uei, one (like him) is enough [*yi erh tsu*]." By later people, however, this saying came to be misconstrued as meaning that K'uei had but one foot (*yi tsu*).

These anecdotes are surely apocryphal, yet the fact that they all center around Confucius is no accident. For it is precisely the Confucianists who, more than any other school of thought, were historically minded and assumed prime responsibility for conserving and editing the ancient texts which eventually became the Chinese classics. In so doing they were, on the one hand, always intensely interested in the search for historical precedents which would confirm their own social and political doctrines; on the other hand, their strong humanism tended to make them either indifferent toward supernatural matters, or to seek to explain them in purely rationalistic terms. The results have been disastrous for the preservation of early Chinese myth, for they mean that it is precisely in those classical texts which might otherwise be expected to be prime repositories of myth, that such myth has either vanished entirely or (more probably) suffered grievous distortion.

Obviously, therefore, our search for myth must go beyond the Confucian-dominated classics to include the writings of the several non-Confucian schools. Among such writings, those of the Taoists, because of their iconoclasm toward Confucian tradition, their greater interest in popular beliefs, and their richly imaginative mode of expression, are by far the most promising. Here again, however, there is a limitation imposed by the philosophical assumptions of Taoism: its denial of teleology and anthropocentrism, and insistence upon a natural rather than a supernatural explanation for the universe. This in practice means that though mythological allusions abound in Taoist writings, they are introduced as a rule only for philosophical or literary effect, and not because the Taoist authors actually believe in them themselves. Rarely, therefore, do these authors bother to narrate at length the myths to which they allude. Rather, they take from them those elements which can be used for allegories of their own invention, thereby to express the philosophical ideas in which they themselves are interested.

A good example is the conversation in the seventeenth chapter of the *Chuang-tzu* (iii cent. B.C.) between a centipede

and that same K'uei whom we have just encountered in Confucian dress. There is no doubt that Chuang Tzu's K'uei is a mythological creature, for he is made to complain to the centipede about his own difficulties in hopping around on one foot, and to ask the latter how he succeeds in controlling those many feet of his. The allegory's purpose, however, is not at all mythological but philosophical. From it we learn the Taoist moral that every creature should be satisfied with his own native endowment, but nothing whatsoever concerning the K'uei himself, other than the basic fact that he is one-footed.

2. *The Problems of Fragmentation and of Language*

Not only does pre-Han literature lack any separate genre which might be called myth, but within any single literary work it is not easy to find a myth recorded in consecutive entirety. All that we have are casual references and tantalizing fragments, widely scattered among texts of diverse date and ideological orientation. No wonder then that scholars can rarely agree as to how to fit these pieces into some kind of unity.

This fragmentation is characteristic even of what is probably the richest single storehouse of Chou mythological lore: the anthology of imaginative and sensuous poems known as the *Ch'u tz'u* or *Songs of Ch'u* (wherein, however, are to be found Han as well as Chou poems). A striking example, to which we shall refer many times, is the *T'ien wen* or "Heavenly Questions" (prob. iv cent. B.C.), whose 185 lines are packed with mythological allusions, all, however, presented in the form of enigmatic riddles. Typical are the following lines (as translated by David Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u, the Songs of the South,* Oxford, 1959, pp. 49, 56):

> *Where is the stone forest? What beast can talk?*
> *Where are the hornless dragons which carry bears*
> *on their backs for sport?* (ll. 47–48)
> *P'eng Chien made a drink-offering of pheasant's*
> *broth. How did the Lord eat of it?*

He received the gift of long-lasting life. Why then was he still sad? (ll. 171–72)

Other than that P'eng Chien may be identified with fair certainty as the Chinese Methuselah, **P'eng Tsu**, practically nothing is known of what is here alluded to (aside from the very uncertain guesses of much later commentators).

The difficulties produced by such fragments are enhanced by linguistic difficulties inherent in the Chinese classical language. In the first place, its many homophones and characters easily confused for one another make very tempting the search for new readings and identifications, usually based on such arguments as: character X of text A appears as character Y of text B; character Y appears in turn as character Z in text C; hence character X of text A and character Z of text C are equivalents. This kind of work, brilliantly performed by a long line of Chinese scholars, has done wonders in elucidating the ancient texts. On the other hand, conducted too exuberantly it can lead to quite startling results.

In the second place, the telegraphic brevity of classical Chinese, coupled with its inflectional inability (without the use of added words) to indicate gender, number, or tense, makes it often possible to translate a small fragment in several ways, with no assurance as to which is correct unless a larger clarifying context can be found. A good example is the fifty-sixth line of the *T'ien wen* poem, wherein most scholars see an allusion to the myth of the shooting of the ten suns by Archer Yi (see III, 4 below), and therefore translate: "Why did Yi shoot down the suns? Why did the ravens shed their wings?" Bernhard Karlgren, however (in his encyclopedic "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," 1946, p. 268), believes that the motif of *ten* suns came to be associated with Archer Yi only in Han times. Therefore he translates in the singular: "Why did Yi shoot at [and not "down"] the sun? Why did the raven shed its feathers?" Either translation is grammatically possible; which one we accept, however, determines our entire decision as to whether or not the two themes originally formed a single myth.

3. *The Problem of Chronology*

The year 221 B.C., because it saw the final unification of "feudal" China into a truly centralized empire, is the great watershed of early Chinese history. Before that year, the country was divided into mutually warring, independent states, each ruled by a hereditary house and divided in turn into lesser domains also held by noble families. Politically, most of this pre-imperial age was covered by the Chou dynasty (ca. 1027–221 B.C.). Following 221, on the other hand, the next several centuries saw the consolidation of a new form of centralized empire, in which an official bureaucracy which was non-hereditary and centrally appointed took the place of the landed aristocracy of Chou times. The patterns of empire then laid down remained the norm until the present century, but the classical phase of Chinese history came to an end with the disintegration of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220).

Culturally speaking, the Chou dynasty was the creative age of China's great classical and philosophical literature, whereas the Han dynasty, though also notably creative, was at the same time the first age when the writings of the past were systematically collected, edited, and commented upon. It was likewise the epoch which saw the appearance (ca. 100 B.C.) of China's first "universal" history. To what extent the Han scholars changed the texts they edited, sometimes introducing (perhaps quite unconsciously) ideas reflecting their own environment, and to what extent they may even have forged works which they then attributed to Chou or earlier times, still remains a subject of great controversy. Fortunately, much has been done by Chinese and Western scholars alike in recent decades to clarify the situation. Nonetheless, many points of uncertainty still remain.

In the field of mythology, the differences between the two dynasties are equally striking. Thus what, in the Chou literature, is fragmented and frequently euhemerized, often becomes, in Han times, so greatly elaborated that though the personages in the myths remain in large part the same, what

is said of them may be totally new. It would seem, in many cases, that the Han writers were tapping new sources of living popular tradition, hitherto neglected by the more aristocratically oriented writers of the Chou. Likewise, for the first time, a very few of the mythological figures are portrayed in sculptured reliefs. A notable example of the new imaginative trend is the *Shan-hai ching* or *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (trad. ascribed in part to the Chou, but probably all of Han date), wherein not only the lands of China proper, but those extending to the far reaches of the earth, are populated by hundreds of strange new gods and monsters. So fantastic and prolific, indeed, are the beings of this book, that one may fairly ask whether many of them are not simply the fanciful creations of their author (or authors), rather than based upon actual popular belief.

On the other hand, we can also often see the Han scholars manfully grappling with a body of older tradition which apparently has lost its living reality. They strive to reconcile seeming differences, to fill in lacunae, to put into order (according to their own ideological preconceptions) matters that they no longer truly understand. These efforts are particularly conspicuous in the disagreements often found among the Han commentators on the Chou classics.

All these developments, it should be kept in mind, are entirely distinct from the phenomenon noted at the very beginning of this essay: the gradual fading, in post-Han times, of most of the ancient gods from popular consciousness, and their replacement by a new and more clearly defined pantheon (no doubt stimulated in part by the advent of Buddhism).

What, then, is the scholar of early Chinese myth to do when confronted by these two very different bodies of literature? Two general approaches are possible, one of which we may term the "historical," the other the "sociological." As respective examples of these approaches, let us briefly contrast the theories of Bernhard Karlgren (expressed in his large "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," 1946), and of Wolfram Eberhard (expressed in several works, notably his

two-volume *Lokalkulturen im alten China,* 1942, which, however, covers much else besides myth proper).

According to Karlgren, the main reason for the recording of ancient Chinese traditions in Chou literature is the fact that the personages in these traditions were regarded by the many grandee houses of Chou times as their ancestors. As a consequence, their memory was kept alive in the ancestral cults maintained by these houses. This, Karlgren believes, explains why they are portrayed neither as outright gods nor yet quite as ordinary mortals, but rather as "supermen," that is to say, as cultural heroes who are definite historical figures, but who at the same time possess something more than purely human characteristics. With the destruction of the old social order at the end of the third century B.C., however, the ancestral cults of these grandee houses lost their social significance, with the result that the memory of the ancient legends and heroes became divorced from living tradition. Thus was the way paved for the fanciful elaborations or antiquarian speculations of the Han writers.

In discussing these legends and heroes, therefore, Karlgren distinguishes sharply between what he calls the "free" texts of Chou times (texts in which the legends and heroes appear casually, without any tendentious purpose), and the fanciful or "systematizing" texts of Han times (in which materials are arranged according to set systems and theories, notably that of the five elements; among these "systematizing" texts Karlgren would also include a few late Chou works). For the study of genuinely early myth and legend, therefore, Karlgren believes that only the pre-Han "free" texts have any real validity.

Eberhard, on the other hand, sees the rise of Chinese civilization as resulting from the interaction and intermixture of various cultural components which, he believes, were in early times ethnically and regionally distinct from one another. Therefore, though by no means indifferent to the problem of historical development, his main interest lies in trying to isolate (regionally rather than chronologically) what he believes to be these basic cultural components. For his pur-

poses, therefore, what is recorded in a Chou text, and what may be said by a writer many centuries or even a millennium later, may both be valid provided they both point toward a common cultural cluster. Basing himself on this standpoint, Eberhard, in a lengthy review (1946), has severely criticized Karlgren's methodology on several counts, two of which in particular may be mentioned:

(1) The mere fact that version A of a given myth happens to appear in an older text than version B, does not necessarily mean that *developmentally* speaking version A is the earlier or more primitive. On the contrary, as Eberhard points out, the Han writers could and did utilize long-existent popular oral tradition to a greater extent than did the more aristocratically oriented writers of the feudal age. (2) Karlgren's belief that most of the beings in the myths were originally human heroes, who only later, in some cases, acquired the attributes of gods or even animals, is at variance with modern ethnological and sociological theory. "If this opinion were correct, Chinese mythology would be the greatest exception hitherto known in the whole field of ethnology: the Chinese would first have created heroes and later only have made them into gods or even animals!"

Karlgren's strictly historical approach does indeed seem overly mechanical when, for example, he accepts or rejects a text simply according to whether it happens to have been written before or after the dividing line of 221 B.C., instead of evaluating, in each case, the particular ideology and other individual circumstances of the text itself. Furthermore, his rigid approach would seem to overlook the possibility of persistence or recurrence of a given motif (perhaps in varying forms) over a very long period of time.

On the other hand, Eberhard's use of chronologically widely separated data for reconstructing an ancient myth (in contrast to his main endeavor, that of isolating a cluster of long-term cultural components) has its obvious dangers. No doubt Eberhard is correct in asserting that "a myth reported only in a later text, may very well represent a form reflecting quite an early stage of development." However, as

he himself then goes on to say, "Of course, we have to prove this in every single case." Unfortunately, the proofs presented by followers of this methodology are by no means always convincing, nor are they sometimes even seriously attempted. In many cases, indeed, they can never be really convincing, simply because the data themselves make this impossible.

In what follows, therefore, we shall try to steer a middle course: that of limiting ourselves (save for the first myth, which is a special case) to those myths for which at least *some* factual basis can be found in the Chou literature. However, we shall not hesitate to add to this what the Han writers have to say, in every instance being careful to warn the reader accordingly.

III. THE MYTHS

The following are five examples of cosmogonic myth; as explained earlier, space does not permit us to discuss, more than incidentally, those having to do with cultural heroes, unless (as in the fifth myth) they also have cosmogonic significance.

1. The P'an-ku Creation Myth

In the *San-wu li-chi* (Record of Cycles in Threes and Fives), an obscure work of the third century A.D. now known only through quotations in later encyclopedias, there appears the following story (here paraphrased):

Heaven and Earth were once inextricably commingled (*hun-tun*) like a chicken's egg, within which was engendered P'an-ku (a name perhaps meaning "Coiled-up Antiquity"). After 18,000 years, this inchoate mass split apart, what was bright and light forming Heaven, and what was dark and heavy forming Earth. Thereafter, during another 18,000

years, Heaven daily increased ten feet in height, Earth daily increased ten feet in thickness, and P'an-ku, between the two, daily increased ten feet in size. This is how Heaven and Earth came to be separated by their present distance of 90,000 *li* (roughly 30,000 English miles).

Other texts, probably somewhat later in date, add the further information that after P'an-ku died, his breath became the wind and clouds, his voice the thunder, his left and right eyes the sun and moon respectively, his four limbs and five "bodies" (fingers?) the four quarters of the earth and five great mountains, his blood the rivers, his muscles and veins the strata of the earth, his flesh the soil, his hair and beard the constellations, his skin and body-hair the plants and trees, his teeth and bones the metals and stones, his marrow gold and precious stones, and his sweat the rain. The parasites on his body, impregnated by the wind, became human beings. In graphic portrayals of much later date, he is often shown as a horned demiurge who, with hammer and adze, chisels out the universe.

Here, in these works of the third century A.D. and later, we find China's *only* clearly recognizable creation myth. Most Chinese scholars believe it to be of non-Chinese origin and link it to the ancestral myth of the Miao and Yao tribal peoples of South China (also first recorded in the third century), in which these tribes trace their origin to a dog named P'an-hu. This dog, a pet of the Chinese legendary ruler Ti K'u (trad. ca. 2400 B.C.), succeeded in bringing to his imperial master the head of a certain troublesome barbarian general, and in accordance with a previously promised reward was given the emperor's own daughter as wife. The dog then carried her off to the mountain fastnesses of South China, where the progeny of the two became the ancestors of the present Miao and Yao tribes. Aside from the phonetic similarity between the names P'an-ku and P'an-hu, however, and the fact that both cults seem to have been centered in South China, where they were sometimes confused with one another, there is little apparent similarity between the myths.

Similarities to the P'an-ku story do appear, however, if we

look farther afield, for example at India and ancient Sumer. Thus the *Rig Veda* tells us that the cosmic waters were originally restrained within a shell, but that the fashioner god, Tvaṣṭṛ, created Heaven and Earth, who in turn engendered Indra. By drinking the soma, Indra became strong and forced Heaven and Earth apart, himself filling up the space between them and also slitting open the cover within which lay the cosmic waters, so that they could issue forth. Another later story in the *Rig Veda* also tells us that when Puruṣa was sacrificed by the gods, the parts of his cut-up body became the sun, sky, atmosphere, earth, four quarters, four social classes of mankind, and so forth.

In Sumer, similarly, it was believed that there first existed the primeval sea, which engendered the cosmic mountain, consisting of Heaven and Earth in undivided form. They in turn produced the air-god Enlil, who separated Heaven from Earth, carried off Earth for himself, and through union with his mother Earth set the stage for the organization of the universe.

Though in China itself the P'an-ku myth does not appear before the third century, Eberhard (in his *Lokalkulturen*, II, 467 ff.) would relate it conceptually to what he believes to be a much earlier Chinese idea: that of a primeval egg or sac, the splitting of which permits its undifferentiated contents to assume form as an organized universe. In its sophisticated version, this conception may well underlie the astronomical theory, current in Han times, according to which Heaven and Earth are shaped like an egg, Earth being enclosed by the sphere of Heaven just as the yolk of an egg is enclosed by its shell.

The first of our texts, it will be remembered, says that Heaven and Earth were once inextricably commingled (*hun-tun*) like a chicken's egg. In late Chou and Han philosophical texts, the same onomatopoeic term *hun-tun* is used to designate the state of undifferentiated chaos before an organized universe came into being. Curiously enough, the term appears again in modern Chinese parlance as the name for a small *sac*-like dumpling (a thin shell of dough enclosing

chopped-up meat), used as the basic ingredient of the popular *hun-tun* soup served in Chinese restaurants.

In the *Shan-hai ching* or *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (bk. 2), of Han date, Hun-tun is personified as a being living southwest of the Mountain of Heaven (T'ien Shan), who has six feet and four wings, is the color of fire, lacks a face or eyes, and is *shaped like a sac.* Among Chou dynasty texts, the *Tso chuan* history (iv cent. B.C., with later additions), under the year 618 B.C., euhemerizes Hun-tun as the evil son of an early sage ruler. Describing his undesirable characteristics, it says, among other things, that he "screens [i.e., covers over or bottles up] righteousness." The best-known Chou reference to Hun-tun, however, is the charming allegory in the seventh chapter of the Taoist work *Chuang-tzu* (iii cent. B.C.). There we are told that Hun-tun or Chaos was the Ruler of the Center, and that he lacked the usual seven openings of other men (eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth). Therefore his friends, Shu and Hu, having been well treated by him, decided to bore such openings in him. Each day they bored one hole, but on the seventh day Hun-tun died.

Such are the scattered data from which we must decide whether or not the cosmogonic *conception* underlying the P'an-ku myth (and not, of course, the myth as such) possibly goes back to early times. Marcel Granet, for his part (in his *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne,* 1926, p. 540 ff.), would link the *hun-tun* idea to another mythical theme in which, though the term *hun-tun* itself does not appear, a leather sack plays a central role. It concerns King Wu-yi (trad. reigned 1198–95 B.C.), one of the last evil rulers of the Shang dynasty, who made a human figure which he called the Spirit of Heaven (T'ien Shen), and played a game of counters with it, which he won. To show his contempt, he then hung up a leather sack filled with blood and shot at it with arrows, saying that he was shooting at Heaven. Soon afterward, while hunting, he was killed by lightning. The same theme recurs almost a millennium later in connection with the last king of Sung, a state which in Chou times

was ruled by descendants of the Shang royal house. This king too hung up a leather blood-filled sack and shot at it, saying that he was shooting at Heaven. Shortly afterward, in 282 B.C., he was attacked by a coalition of other states, killed, and his state annihilated.

Possibly Granet is correct in believing that this theme is related to the *hun-tun* conception. On the other hand, a parallel has also been suggested between it and the theme of Archer Yi's shooting at the sun (see III, 4 below).

2. *The Fashioning Deity Nü-kua*

Nü-kua, the "Woman Kua," though fairly prominent in Han times, appears only twice in earlier literature. Despite her name, it is only in the first century A.D. that her sex is positively stated. At about the same time she also becomes identified as either the sister or consort of the much better known Fu-hsi (Subduer of Animals), a sage (trad. ca. 2800 B.C.) said to have taught men how to hunt and cook, to make nets, and so on. On the stone reliefs of the Wu Liang offering shrines (ca. A.D. 150), Fu-hsi and Nü-kua appear together; their upper bodies are human, but merge below into serpent tails that are intertwined with one another. Fu-hsi holds a carpenter's square in his hand and Nü-kua a compass, apparently as symbols of their constructive activities. The constructive work of Fu-hsi, however (other than as inventor and ruler), has not come down to us, and we may wonder whether the purported association between him and the fashioning deity Nü-kua really goes back before Han times.

The best account of the latter's activities occurs in the sixth chapter of the Han Taoist work, *Huai-nan-tzu* (ii cent. B.C., a work rich in mythological materials):

> In very ancient times, the four pillars [at the compass points] were broken down, the nine provinces [of the habitable world] were split apart, Heaven did not wholly cover [Earth], and Earth did not completely support [Heaven]. Fires flamed without being extin-

> guished, waters inundated without being stopped, fierce beasts ate the people, and birds of prey seized the old and weak in their claws. Thereupon Nü-kua fused together stones of the five colors with which she patched together azure Heaven. She cut off the feet of a turtle with which she set up the four pillars. She slaughtered the Black Dragon in order to save the province of Chi [the present Hopei and Shansi provinces in North China]. She collected the ashes of reeds with which to check the wild waters.

The text goes on to say that thereafter there was universal harmony: the seasons followed their due course, beasts sheathed their claws and teeth and serpents hid their poison, the people lived lives of undreaming sleep and uncalculating wakefulness.

The "four pillars" mentioned in this myth belong, of course, to the cosmological belief, found in many cultures, that Heaven is supported on pillars or some other kind of foundation. In China (where the pillars were thought of as mountains), the earliest mention is that in the *T'ien wen* poem (iv cent. B.C.), which, however, speaks not of four but of eight pillars. The same poem, as well as the Kung-kung story below (and other texts as well), further makes mention of the *wei* or "cords" of Earth. As a technical term, *wei* designates the cords which, on a chariot, secure its canopy to the frame or body. By analogy, therefore, the *wei* of Earth (sometimes stated to be four in number) must likewise serve to attach the canopy of Heaven to Earth below. (The comparison of Heaven to a chariot's canopy and Earth to its body is a common one in the texts.) Just how the *wei* function in relation to the (four or eight) pillars of Heaven is, however, unstated.

The story of Nü-kua is by several Han writers linked to the cosmic struggle between Chuan-hsü (legendary ruler, trad. XXV cent. B.C.) and Kung-kung (euhemerized in Chou writings as a human "rebel," but in late Han times described as a horned monster with serpent's body). Wang Ch'ung

(A.D. 27–ca. 100), for example, in his *Lun heng* or *Critical Essays* (chs. 31 and 46), says that anciently, when Kung-kung fought unsuccessfully with Chuan-hsü to become ruler, he blundered in his rage against Mount Pu-chou (in the northwest quarter), thereby causing the pillar of Heaven and the cord of Earth to break off at that point. It was then that Nü-kua patched up Heaven with melted stones and cut off a turtle's feet to hold it up. Nonetheless, Heaven and Earth have since that time sloped toward one another in the northwest, but have tilted away from one another in the opposite direction. This is why the astral bodies of Heaven continue to this day to move in a westerly direction, whereas the rivers (of China) on Earth flow toward the ocean (in the east). In the *T'ien wen* there is already mention of the gap in the southeast between Heaven and Earth, from which we may infer that at the time of this poem the story of Kung-kung was already current.

We may question, however, whether this story and the Nü-kua myth properly belong together. In the *Huai-nan-tzu* (ch. 3), for example, the Kung-kung story appears alone, without any mention of Nü-kua at all, and though the two are joined in the fifth chapter of *Lieh-tzu* (a Taoist work, trad. Chou but prob. Han), their order is there reversed (the story of Nü-kua given first, followed by that of Kung-kung). This, of course, destroys any logical connection between them.

In a passage (now known only through later quotation) from the *Feng-su t'ung-yi* (Comprehensive Meaning of Customs), by Ying Shao (ca. 140–ca. 206), Nü-kua is also portrayed as the creator of mankind:

> It is popularly said that when Heaven and Earth had opened forth, but before there were human beings, Nü-kua created men by patting yellow earth together. But the work tasked her strength and left her no free time, so that she then dragged a string through mud, thus heaping it up so as to make it into men. Therefore the rich and the noble are those men of yellow earth,

whereas the poor and the lowly—all ordinary people—
are those cord-made men.

Another passage from the same work (likewise now known only in quotation) tells us further that Nü-kua is prayed to as the goddess of marriage, because it is she who first instituted marriage. (In other words, having created men, she taught them how to propagate.)

Finally, we are told in the *Shan-hai ching* (bk. 16) that beyond the northwest sea there are ten spirits, called "Nü-kua's intestines," because (after she died) they were transformed into spirits (from her intestines).

Whether or not Nü-kua as the creator of mankind represents simply a popular addition to the primary theme of Nü-kua as the repairer and organizer of the world, it is evident that neither theme constitutes a true creation myth (in the sense of the P'an-ku myth), since both take place in an already existing universe. We might assume the entire Nü-kua cult to be a Han creation, were it not for two bare references to her occurring in Chou literature. The more important of these is one of the riddles in *T'ien wen:* "Nü-kua had a body. Who formed and fashioned it?" This certainly suggests that Nü-kua's fashioning activities were already known in Chou times if, as seems reasonable, it should be interpreted as meaning: Nü-kua was a fashioner of other things. Who then fashioned her?

3. *The Separation of Heaven and Earth*

We have already encountered the theme of the separation of Heaven and Earth in the P'an-ku myth. It crops up again, though in a very different context, in two texts of Chou date. The first is one of the major classics, the *Shu ching* or *Classic of History* (sect. *Lü hsing*, trad. x cent. B.C., but prob. some cents. later). There we are told that the Miao (a tribe or confraternity, notorious as troublemakers during the reigns of Yao and Shun, trad. xxiv–xxiii cent. B.C.) created oppressive punishments which threw the people into disorder. Shang Ti, the "Lord on High" (name of the most

prominent ancient divinity), surveyed the people and found them lacking in virtue. Out of pity for those who were innocent, the August Lord (surely another name for Shang Ti, though the euhemerizing commentators interpret him as either Yao or Shun) had the Miao exterminated. "Then he charged Ch'ung and Li to cut the communication between Heaven and Earth so that there would be no descending and ascending [of spirits and men between the two]." After this had been done, order was restored and the people returned to virtue.

The second much more detailed account—actually an early exegesis of the foregoing—is that in the *Kuo yü* or *Narratives of the States* (iv cent. B.C. with later additions; sect. *Ch'u yü*, II, 1). In it King Chao of Ch'u (515–489), puzzled by the *Shu ching*'s statement about the separating of Heaven from Earth, asks his minister: "If it had not been thus, would the people have been able to ascend to Heaven?" To which the minister, after making denial, supplies his own metaphorical explanation:

Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons who were so perspicacious, single-minded, and reverential that their understanding enabled them to make meaningful collation of what lies above and below, and their insight to illumine what is distant and profound. Therefore the spirits would descend into them. The possessors of such powers were, if men, called *hsi* (shamans), and, if women, *wu* (shamannesses). It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters. As a consequence, the spheres of the divine and the profane were kept distinct. The spirits sent down blessings on the people, and accepted from them their offerings. There were no natural calamities.

In the degenerate time of Shao-hao (trad. xxvi cent. B.C.), however, the Nine Li (a troublesome tribe like the Miao) threw virtue into disorder. Men and spirits became intermingled, with each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances which had hitherto been

conducted by the shamans. As a consequence, men lost their reverence for the spirits, the spirits violated the rules of men, and natural calamities arose. Hence the successor of Shao-hao, Chuan-hsü, charged Ch'ung, Governor of the South, to handle the affairs of Heaven in order to determine the proper places of the spirits, and Li, Governor of Fire, to handle the affairs of Earth in order to determine the proper places of men. "And such is what is meant by 'cutting the communication between Heaven and Earth.'"

Still later, however, the Miao, like the Nine Li before them, stirred up new disorders, obliging the ruler Yao to order the descendants of Ch'ung and Li to resume the tasks of their forebears. Since that time members of the same two families have continued to maintain the proper distinctions between Heaven and Earth. Under King Hsüan of Chou (827–782), one of them remarked of the two ancestors: "Ch'ung lifted Heaven up and Li pressed Earth down."

A detailed comparison of these two texts is unnecessary, other than to say that the first telescopes events which by the second are placed in two different periods (the troubles caused by the Nine Li during the reigns of Shao-hao and Chuan-hsü, and the similar troubles caused by the Miao during that of Yao); that both accounts are in part euhemerized; but that this is especially evident of the second, with its added "human" details and metaphorical explanation of what, in the first text, might be understood as a literal separating of Heaven from Earth. However, the second text also reveals the real state of affairs in its significant final quotation: "Ch'ung lifted Heaven up and Li pressed Earth down."

The idea that Heaven and Earth were once joined together, thereby permitting free communication between men and the divine powers, but later became separated, is extremely widespread among many cultures. It and related concepts have been brilliantly analyzed by Mircea Eliade in his two books, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954; first published in French in 1949) and *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (1951). In the former (p. 12 ff.) he discusses the concept of an *axis mundi*. This

cosmic symbol, widely found among Asian peoples, may take the form of a mountain, a sacred temple, palace or city, or a tree or a vine; its distinguishing characteristic is that it is believed to occupy the center of the world and to connect Earth with Heaven. Concerning the ideas underlying this belief, Eliade writes further (p. 91):

> . . . the myths of many peoples allude to a very distant epoch when men knew neither death nor toil nor suffering and had a bountiful supply of food merely for the taking. *In illo tempore,* the gods descended to earth and mingled with men; for their part, men could easily mount to heaven. As the result of a ritual fault, communications between heaven and earth were interrupted and the gods withdrew to the highest heavens. Since then, men must work for their food and are no longer immortal.

In his *Le chamanisme,* Eliade has also discussed at length what it is that motivates the shaman when he enters his ecstatic trance. It is his desire to be able thereby to ascend to Heaven and thus momentarily restore, in his own person, that contact between Heaven and Earth which had more generally existed prior to the "fall."

It can hardly be doubted that our two Chinese texts are reflections of these widespread concepts. For in them, too, the cutting of communication between Heaven and Earth follows upon a "ritual fault," and the second text, in particular, describes in some detail the male and female shamans who enjoy contact with the spirits.

There is, however, also an important shift of emphasis: the fact that in the Chinese story it is the shamans only, and not the people as a whole, who originally enjoyed communication with the spirits, and that the usurpation of this prerogative by other persons then constituted the "ritual fault" leading to the cutting of communication between Heaven and Earth. Conceivably this shift in emphasis is not, after all, deeply significant, for it may be merely an attempt on the part of the author (or of the minister whose speech he is

ostensibly recording) to enhance the prestige of the shamans by emphasizing their dominant role in earliest times. We cannot really know. (In his *Le chamanisme*, pp. 396–97, Eliade has also discussed this second text, basing himself, however, on an inexact translation which has led to certain misunderstandings on his part.)

The Miao, it will be remembered, are mentioned in both texts as one of the two groups responsible for the ritual disorder. Maspero ("Légendes mythologiques," pp. 97–98) has already pointed out that in the *Shan-hai ching* (bk. 17) these Miao are described as winged human beings living in the extreme northwestern corner of the world, while in a still later text they are said to have wings but to be unable to fly. Here, perhaps, is a symbolic expression of the "fall": the fact that the Miao had once been able to communicate with Heaven, but lost this power when, because of their ritual fault, the Lord on High exiled them to their distant region and ordered the (shamans) Ch'ung and Li to sever the communication between Heaven and Earth.

Are there other passages in Chinese literature expressive of a paradisal era followed by a "fall"? The Taoists often write about man's state of innocence before the rise of human institutions, but it is hard to know whether this is simply a Taoist philosophical abstraction, or may be inspired, at least in part, by popular traditions concerning a primordial paradise. The latter hypothesis, however, seems quite reasonable.

Among such passages, one of the most vivid is that in the eighth chapter of *Huai-nan-tzu*, describing the era of Great Purity, when men were genuine and simple, sparing of speech and spontaneous in conduct. "They were joined in body to Heaven and Earth, united in spirit to the *yin* and *yang* [the negative and positive cosmic forces or principles], and in harmonious oneness with the four seasons." At that time wind and rain brought no calamities, sun and moon equably distributed their light, the planets did not deviate from their courses. But then came the era of decline: men began to mine the mountains for minerals, to make fire with

the fire drill, to fell trees for houses, to hunt and fish, and to do the many other things which destroyed their original purity.

A later passage in the same chapter is even more suggestive of an ancient Chinese Garden of Eden: In ancient times men entrusted their children to birds' nests and left the grain in the fields. Without fear of injury, they could freely grasp the tails of tigers and panthers and tread upon serpents. Then, however, came the inevitable decline. It is notable that nowhere here or elsewhere do the Taoists provide a mythological explanation for the "fall"; it is simply, for them, the inexorable concomitant of the rise of human civilization.

4. Sun Myths

Anciently there existed not one but ten suns, each of which would appear in succession on each day of the Chinese ten-day week. Once, however, at a time usually placed in the reign of Yao, all ten suns, through some confusion, appeared simultaneously, so that it seemed as if the world were about to burn up. At this climactic point the Chou texts (*Chuang-tzu*, ch. 2; *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu*, XXII, 5; etc.) leave off; for the denouement we must turn to the *Huai-nan-tzu* (ch. 8). There we are told that when the suns appeared, a certain Yi (or Hou Yi), famous as an archer, shot down all but one, thus rescuing the world and leaving the single sun which moves in the sky today. At Yao's bidding he also killed a number of destructive monsters (described in gory detail in works like *Shan-hai ching*). So overjoyed were the people by this happy ending that (somewhat inconsequentially, as we might think) they thereupon established Yao as their ruler.

There is an ambiguous line in the *T'ien wen* which, as usually translated, reads: "Why did Yi shoot down the suns? Why did the ravens shed their feathers?" Here we have the earliest reference to the belief that in the sun (or in each individual sun) there is a raven. (In *Huai-nan-tzu*, ch. 7, it is said to be three-legged.) From this line one might also

conclude that the story of Archer Yi's shooting at the ten suns goes back at least to the fourth century B.C.

Karlgren, however, believes the story to have originated only in Han times, and therefore, as we have seen (II, 2 above), would translate the line in the singular: "Why did Yi shoot at the sun? Why did the raven shed its feathers?" His main reason for so doing is the chronological difficulty that, in other Chou texts, Yi appears as a great but arrogant hunter who lived in the early part of the Hsia dynasty (a century or more after Yao), and who, after usurping the throne, came to a bad end. Yi's shooting at a *single* sun (and not ten of them) is, therefore, as interpreted by Karlgren, simply "a sacrilegious act," expressive of Yi's hybris, but having nothing to do with the threatened burning up of the earth; he compares it with the act of the two kings (see III, 1 above) who shot at a leather sack filled with blood, calling it Heaven.

There are several arguments, however, which—at least to this writer—speak in favor of the more usual interpretation. In the first place, Yi's shooting at the ten suns provides a necessary conclusion to a myth which otherwise—quite literally—would leave the several suns dangling in mid-air. In the second place, is it really fair to look for strict chronological and thematic consistency in what, after all, is not history but myth? Yi seems to have been the focus of several cycles of story. There is no real reason to be surprised, therefore, if he appears as a hero in one cycle, but as a villain in another.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important, the theme of saving the world from multiple suns is by no means peculiarly Chinese. On the contrary, as shown by Eduard Erkes ("Chinesisch-amerikanische Mythenparallelen," 1926), it has many parallels on both sides of the Pacific. Among the Battaks of Sumatra and the Semangs of Malaya, for example, the sun is believed to be the parent of several children suns, but is tricked by the moon into devouring them when they threaten to burn up the world. Among the Shasta Indians of California it is the coyote who slays nine of ten brother-suns (a striking numerical agreement with the Chinese myth). And among

the Golds of eastern Siberia there is even a national hero who, in the manner of the Chinese story, shoots down two of three suns when they make the world unbearably hot.

Returning to China, we find considerable lore concerning the daily course taken by the sun (or suns) across the sky. Perhaps the earliest source is the opening chapter of the *Shu ching* (Classic of History), which, as usual for this work, is considerably euhemerized:

> He [the sage Yao] then charged Hsi and Ho, in reverent accordance with august Heaven, to calculate and delineate the sun, moon, stars and constellations, and respectfully to give the people the seasons. He separately charged the younger Hsi to reside among the Yü barbarians, [at the place] called the Valley of Light (Yang-ku), there to receive the rising sun as a guest and regulate its activities in the east. . . . He further charged the youngest Hsi to reside in Southern Chiao, there to regulate its doings in the south. . . . He separately charged the younger Ho to reside in the west, [at the place] called the Valley of Darkness (Mei-ku), there respectfully to see off the setting sun and regulate the completion of its work in the west. . . . He further charged the youngest Ho to reside in the Northern Region (Shuo-fang), [at the place] called the City of Obscurity (Yu-tu), there to supervise its operations in the north.

Other Chou texts make it evident that the two sets of three brothers, here spoken of as supervising the movements of the sun and other heavenly bodies, are in actual fact mere multiplications of a single person, Hsi-ho. (The multiplication was no doubt motivated by the desire to provide enough brothers to take care of all celestial operations in all quarters of the sky.) As pointed out by Karlgren, Hsi-ho appears in the Chou texts simply as an ancient cult-master (sex unspecified) who observes the heavenly bodies, creates the calendar, prognosticates by means of the sun, and controls the sun in its movements.

In the *Shan-hai ching* (bk. 15), on the other hand, Hsi-ho for the first time becomes the mother of the sun or suns (for ten are specifically mentioned). She lives beyond the Southeast Sea, in the midst of the Sweet Waters (Kan-shui), where she bathes the suns one by one in the Sweet Gulf (Kan-yüan). The same work (bks. 9 and 14) tells us further that in the eastern Valley of Light (already mentioned in the *Shu ching*) there grows a tree known as the Fu-sang (Supporting Mulberry; other names for it appear in other texts). Its trunk reaches a height of 300 *li* (about 100 miles), yet its leaves are no bigger than mustard seeds. It is in the branches of this tree that the suns (personified, it will be remembered, as ravens) rest when they are not crossing the sky; as soon as one of them returns from its journey, another starts forth.

The daily itinerary of the sun (or suns) is best described in the third chapter of *Huai-nan-tzu* (though several of its place names also occur in other texts, both of Chou and Han time). At dawn, we are told, the sun first emerges from the Valley of Light and bathes in the Hsien Pool (presumably the same as the Sweet Gulf mentioned in *Shan-hai-ching*, and identified in some texts as a constellation). Maspero points out ("Légendes mythologiques," pp. 26–27) that at the Chou royal court there was a Hsien Pool Dance, the details of which are uncertain, but which is said to have been performed at the summer solstice on a square outdoor altar in the middle of a pond.

The *Huai-nan-tzu* goes on to say that after bathing, the sun ascends the Fu-sang tree and from there crosses the sky, passing en route a dozen or more places of which we know little more than the names. Finally it arrives at Yen-tzu, said to be a mountain in the extreme west of the world. There, at its setting place, grows another mythological tree known as the Jo tree, the flowers of which shine with a reddish glow. It has been suggested by modern scholars that these flowers symbolize either the glow of sunset or the twinkling of stars as they appear after sunset.

The *Ch'u tz'u* anthology contains a poem, probably of the

third century B.C., called *Tung chün* (Lord of the East), which, though it never mentions the sun by name, seems to be a hymn sung in its praise. From it we may infer that the sun uses a chariot when it traverses the sky, for the poem's opening lines read (as translated by David Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u, the Songs of the South,* Oxford, 1959, p. 41):

With a faint flush I start to come out of the east,
Shining down on my threshold, Fu-sang.
As I urge my horses slowly forward,
The night sky brightens, and day has come.

The last two lines of this hymn give us the one and only hint in all early Chinese literature as to how, after setting, the sun makes its way (perhaps under the earth?) back to its eastern starting point:

Then holding my reins I plunge down to my setting,
On my gloomy night journey back to the east.

5. *Flood Myths*

Of all the mythological themes of ancient China, the earliest and by far the most pervasive is that of flood. It appears in writings belonging to the beginning of the Chou dynasty (*Shih ching* or *Classic of Poetry* and *Shu ching*), and thereafter the references are too numerous to be listed here. Though it crops up in localized form in conjunction with several minor figures (including Kung-kung, whom we have already encountered in connection with Nü-kua in III, 2 above), its really universal version is that in which Yü, together with his father Kun, play the major roles. The former is renowned in history not only as conqueror of the flood, but also as founder of China's first hereditary dynasty, that of Hsia (trad. in 2205 B.C.). Though Yü and his father are portrayed in the orthodox accounts as human beings, the written graphs for their names betray their non-human origin: that for Kun contains the element meaning "fish," and that for Yü is written with an element often found in the names of reptiles, insects, and the like.

The euhemerized version of the Kun-Yü myth, notably as found in the early chapters of the *Shu ching*, may be summarized as follows:

"Everywhere the tremendous flood waters were wreaking destruction. Spreading afar, they embraced the mountains and rose above the hills. In a vast flow they swelled up to Heaven. The people below were groaning." In response to their appeals, a being who in the *Shu ching* is referred to simply as Ti, "Lord," rather reluctantly (because he had reservations about his ability) commanded Kun to deal with the flood. (By the commentators this "Lord" is equated with the sage ruler Yao; in all probability, however, he was none other than the supreme divinity, Shang Ti, the "Lord on High.")

For nine years Kun labored without success to dam up the waters. At the end of that time either Yao or his successor Shun (the texts differ) had Kun executed at the Feather Mountain (Yü-shan), and ordered Kun's son, Yü, to continue the task. The latter, instead of trying to dam up the waters in the manner of his father, adopted the new technique of channeling passages for them to drain off to the sea. In this way he eventually conquered the flood and made the land fit for habitation. As a reward, he was given the throne by Shun and became founder of the Hsia dynasty.

In contrast to this "historical" account, we can, by piecing together the fragments found both in Chou and Han literature, produce another version which is much more "mythological":

On being ordered to deal with the flood, Kun stole from the Lord the "swelling mold" (*hsi jang*)—a magical kind of soil which had the property of ever swelling in size. With this he tried to build dams which, through their swelling, would hold back the waters. When his efforts failed, the Lord, angered by his theft, had him executed at Feather Mountain, a sunless place in the extreme north. There his body remained for three years without decomposing, until somebody (unspecified) cut it open with a sword, whereupon Yü emerged from his father's belly. (One tradition says that

Yü was born from a stone, which would apparently signify that Kun's body had turned to stone.) Following Yü's birth, Kun became transformed into an animal—variously said to be a yellow bear, black fish, three-legged turtle, or yellow dragon—and plunged into the Feather Gulf (Yü-yüan). A cryptic line in the *T'ien wen* poem, however, suggests that he subsequently managed to get to the west, where he was restored to life by a shamanness.

Yü, we are told, "came down from on high" to continue his father's work. He was helped by a winged dragon which, going ahead of him, trailed its tail over the ground and thus marked the places where channels should be dug. For some eight or ten years Yü labored so intensely that, though several times passing the door of his home, he had no time to visit his family within. He wore the nails off his hands, the hair off his shanks, and developed a lameness giving him a peculiar gait which in later times came to be known as the "walk of Yü." Nonetheless, he eventually succeeded in draining the great rivers to the sea, expelling snakes and dragons from the marshlands, and making the terrain fit for cultivation. So great, indeed, were his achievements that the *Tso chuan* history, under the year 541 B.C., reports a noble as exclaiming: "Were it not for Yü, we would indeed be fish!"

There are many other stories about Yü, for example, that he used the same "swelling mold" which had brought disaster to his father to build China's great mountains. Or again, we read that he ordered two of his officials (presumably after he became ruler) to pace off the dimensions of the world from east to west and north to south. In this way they determined it to be a perfect square, measuring exactly 233,500 *li* (roughly 77,833 miles) and 75 paces in each direction. Yü himself also traveled extensively. His itinerary included mythological places like that of the Fu-sang tree (where, as we have seen, the sun comes up), as well as the lands of the Black-teeth People, the Winged People, the Naked People, and many more; among the latter he even stripped himself naked so as to accord with local custom. Furthermore, Yü was a mighty warrior who conquered notorious rebels and

gained the allegiance of ten thousand states. On one occasion he held a great assembly on a mountain consisting, in its euhemerized version, of dependent nobles, but elsewhere described as an assembly of spirits.

One curious episode concerns Yü's wife, the Girl of T'u, whom he met and married in the course of his flood labors. Later, while digging a passage through a certain mountain, he was changed (for unexplained reasons) into a bear. His wife, seeing him, ran away and herself became changed to stone. She was pregnant at the time, and so when Yü pursued her and called out, "Give me my son!" the stone split open on its north side and a son, Ch'i, came forth. It should be added that the name of this son (who succeeded Yü as second ruler of the Hsia dynasty) means "to open."

Of the foregoing episodes, most are already attested by the Chou texts. Some, however—notably Kun's theft of the "swelling mold," Yü's use of it to build the great mountains, and the measuring of the world by his two officials—are known only from Han works (primarily *Huai-nan-tzu* and *Shan-hai-ching*). Of still later date, moreover, is the story of Ch'i's birth, which first appears only in a seventh-century A.D. commentary, where it is claimed, quite erroneously, to come from the *Huai-nan-tzu*. At first sight the story appears to be nothing more than the clumsy repetition of two already attested themes, since in it Ch'i (like his father Yü) is born from a stone, and Yü (like his father Kun) is changed into a bear. Yet it would be unwise to dismiss it simply as a late and deliberate literary invention, for already in 111 B.C., according to the sixth chapter of *Han shu* (History of the Han Dynasty), Emperor Wu of that dynasty issued an edict in which he said: "We have seen the mother-stone of the Hsia sovereign Ch'i." This can only mean that at that time the belief that Ch'i was born from a stone was already current.

The story of Kun's transformation into an animal also raises a problem: the fact that in its Chou version (see *Tso chuan* under the year 535 B.C.) the animal in question is a bear, whereas in other much later versions it is variously described as a fish, turtle, or dragon. Kun's close associations with water

make any one of these latter interpretations much more plausible. Nevertheless, the earlier bear version cannot be rejected out of hand, since its context is a story in which a noble, having dreamed that he was visited by a bear, is told that this is none other than Kun's spirit.

The fact that the bear is associated both with Kun and Yü (if the story of the latter's change into a bear can be accepted as more than literary invention) has been adduced as evidence for an ancient (and possibly totemistic) bear cult in China. Certainly it accords very poorly with the otherwise overwhelmingly aquatic associations of Kun and Yü alike. This contradiction, together with other thematic disparities, suggests that the Kun-Yü myth (aside from its central theme of flood) is by no means a homogeneous entity, but rather an amalgam of several cultural components which, originally, may have been geographically and perhaps ethnically quite distinct from one another. Just how these diverse cultural components should be interpreted and localized, however, is by no means an easy question. To cite only two of several hypotheses: both Maspero ("Légendes mythologiques," pp. 70–73) and Eberhard (*Lokalkulturen*, I, 365; II, 380–81, etc.) believe that the Kun-Yü myth originally had two major centers of development. Maspero, however, would locate these in North China (along the upper and lower reaches of the Yellow River), whereas by Eberhard they would be placed much farther south (very roughly along a west-east axis extending from eastern Szechuan to coastal China).

In closing, let us repeat (in slightly expanded form) two conclusions already suggested by Maspero: (1) The flood motif is by no means uniquely Chinese, for it is widely found among other peoples of East and Southeast Asia. Hence it could not have been inspired by the localized memory of any particular flood, whether along the Yellow River or elsewhere. (2) Between the Chinese and the Biblical or other Near Eastern flood stories there is this basic difference: in the Chinese version the flood is not inflicted as divine retribution for human sin, but simply epitomizes the condition of the

world before there yet existed an organized human society. What is emphasized, therefore, is not the flood as such. Rather it is the task of draining the land and rendering it fit for settled human life. In essence, therefore, the Chinese myth is one about the origins of civilization, in which a divine being, Yü, descends from on high, creates a habitable world for mankind, and founds the first civilized state, the perpetuation of which he ensures by marrying a human mortal.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

1. The fragmentary and episodic nature of China's ancient myths suggests that they are not homogeneous creations, but rather the amalgams—still incomplete at the time of their recording—of regionally and perhaps ethnically diversified materials.

2. The intense historical-mindedness of the Chinese—displayed already in very early times—together with their tendency to reject supernatural explanations for the universe—caused them to "humanize" or "euhemerize" much of what had originally been myth into what came to be accepted as authentic history. No doubt this trend was encouraged by the eagerness of the noble houses of feudal China to find convincing genealogies for themselves among the shadowy figures of ancient tradition. So early did the process begin, in relationship to the development of written literature, that it largely prevented the myths from being recorded in this literature in their pristine mythological form. This situation is perhaps well-nigh unique among the major civilizations of antiquity.

3. Chinese scholars of the past few decades—notably the historian Ku Chieh-kang—have devoted much energy to the problem of the chronological stratification of early Chinese myth. In so doing they have demonstrated a widespread

phenomenon: the fact that the "historical age" of a myth (the period of history to which it purports to belong) usually stands in inverse ratio to its "literary age" (the period when it is first actually recorded in the literature). In other words, the earlier the purported age of a myth, the later is its actual appearance in the literature.

This phenomenon quite possibly reflects the gradual geographical expansion of Chinese civilization, in the course of which it absorbed the cultural traditions—including myths—of peoples originally lying outside the Chinese orbit. As these myths were thus successively acquired, the historically minded Chinese tried to fit them into a chronological sequence, in which each new acquisition had to be dated earlier than its predecessor, since the lower chronological levels had already been pre-empted. Confirmation of this phenomenon is in general supplied by the five myths we have studied (aside from the fourth, that of the ten suns), as shown by the following table (in which, of course, the dates under the middle column are traditional only):

Myth	*Historical Age*	*Literary Age*
P'an-ku	Beginning of creation	iii cent. A.D.
Nü-kua	Fu-hsi (2852–2738)	Only two pre-Han references (one of iv cent. B.C.)
Separation of Heaven and Earth	Chuan-hsü (2513–2436)	First half of Chou
Ten suns	Yao (2357–2256)	Second half of Chou
Flood	Yü (2205–2198)	Early years of Chou

Of these five examples, the flood myth of Yü, indubitably the oldest in literary age, also has by far the greatest hold on the Chinese consciousness. That of P'an-ku, on the other hand, is both the youngest and the most obviously alien (unless, which is far from certain, it can be *conceptually* linked with the possibly Chou-time notion of the primordial universe as an egg or a sac).

4. It is rather striking that, aside from this one myth, China—perhaps alone among the major civilizations of antiquity—has no real story of creation. This situation is paralleled by what we find in Chinese philosophy, where, from the very start, there is a keen interest in the relationship of man to man and in the adjustment of man to the physical universe, but relatively little interest in cosmic origins.

5. Violence and drama, boisterous humor or morbid macabreness, a frank concern with sex or the other bodily functions: all these are traits often found in other mythologies, but softened or absent in the myths we have examined. No doubt the selectivity of these myths—the fact that they are cosmogonic rather than intimately "human" in their subject matter—is partly responsible for this situation. Yet there also seems to be a reflection here of a broader phenomenon: the didactic tone and concern for moral sensibility found in much early Chinese literature. It is striking, nonetheless, that when it comes to actual human history, the writers of ancient China could, if need be, record quite unflinchingly the raw facts of life.

6. That the themes of ancient Chinese myth are by no means peculiar to China is demonstrated by the outside parallels noted by us for four out of our five examples (all save that of Nü-kua).

7. Virtually the only texts recovered in original form from pre-Han China are the short and restricted inscriptions on Chou bronze vessels or the even shorter and more restricted inscriptions on Shang divination bones. Almost none of the more extensive literature written on bamboo slips has come down to us physically, owing to the North China climate. This fact, coupled with the rarity of anthropomorphic portrayal in pre-Han art, makes it unlikely—though prophesy is admittedly dangerous—that future archaeology will add very greatly to what we already know about the myths of ancient China from traditional literary sources.

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